



GEOPOLITICAL CALCULATIONS, COLONIAL SEPARATIST POLITICS AND NATION-BUILDING IN SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

The geostrategic position of Syria was the main feature that allowed the West to gamble in the region in the 17th century. The disintegration and finally the downfall of the Ottoman empire in the First World War enabled the West to have a stronghold in the Middle East. Henceforth, the polarisation and division created by the West with their cultural blinders led to a much-divided society before 'modern' structures of Syrian state would even begin to emerge. When Syria got independence in April 1946, the West and French colonisers with their manipulative measures of stratification of people into class and sects accentuated the problem. Consequent of this policy led to a sharp divide between notables and peasantry and amongst the different communities and sects. This resulted in the growth of secessionists' movements among the sub-state groups/identities within the states and competition from the neighbouring states like Jordan and Iraq in the region. The seed of separatist policies sowed by the colonial rulers in Syria continues to have serious implications even today. This paper critically analyses the role of the French Colonial powers in Syria and the policies executed that continues to impede the nation-building process in Syria.

KEYWORDS: Syria, Nation-building, Geopolitics, French Colonialism, Separatist politics Secessionist movements.

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work, Rosenau states that the main ingredient to "understanding a nation-state's behaviour is to uncover its 'genotype' - meaning every nation has distinct attributes that may make certain factors more determinant of its foreign policy behaviour than others" (1969). In the Syrian context, the geopolitical position is one of its unique characteristics that influences and determines its behaviour towards the outside environment and vice versa. Scholars like Albert Hourani and Raymond Hinnebusch believe that Syria's geographic location shaped its historical fate (Hourani, 1946, Hinnebusch, 2011). Patrick Seale extends the scope of Syria's unique geopolitical position by stating the following:

"Syria lies at the centre of these cross-currents... Indeed, her internal affairs are almost meaningless unless related to the wider context, first of her Arab neighbours and then of other interested Powers. It is no accident that Syria should reflect in her internal political structure the rivalries of her neighbours ... discord in Syria is exported to her neighbours and beyond so that in the search for the causes of some grave international crisis, the track sometimes leads to Damascus" (Seale, 1965).

This geopolitical location determined Syria's behaviour towards other states. Added to this, the circumstances under which independent Syria was created played a crucial role in its nation-building process and behaviour towards external states. Independent Syria held the existing national-territorial frontiers of the Arab states as artificial and put it upon itself to undo the 'historical error' (Seale, 1986). This understanding made Syria never to formally accept Lebanon as an independent state. It

was only after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, and following the large-scale protests in Lebanon and international pressures that Syria withdrew from Lebanon and in 2008 established diplomatic relations with Lebanon.

Historical Background

The creation of a political arrangement under the Umayyads in the seventh century was an epoch making in the history of the region. For the first time, Damascus was at the heart of a vast empire, one which stretched from the Atlas Mountains of present-day Morocco to the Hindu Kush of modern Pakistan (Sahner, 2014, Hourani, 1991). The Historical Syria comprises all four modern states—Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon—as well as the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and substantial portions of south-eastern Turkey. Since the collapse of the Ummayyad Dynasty in 750 C.E, the longing for the greater geographical area and political dominance still resonates in Syria. In 1919, the General Syrian Congress continued to include a large part of Iraq and Saudi Arabia within the geographical Syria (Pipes, 1990). After the Ba'ath Party came the power in 1963, the struggle for Greater Syria grew even stronger.

The territory that is now modern-day Syria was once a part of the Ottoman Empire from 1518 to 1918. During this period, it was not directly ruled by the Ottomans but was divided into several vilayets, with Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut being the major ones after 1864. Local figures, such as the Azm family and later Ahmad Jazzar, served as Ottoman Pashas and enjoyed a degree of autonomy. There was relatively free movement of people and goods in the region. However, the 1860 conflict led the Ottoman Sultan to limit the powers of these locally-administered areas and centralize authority. This change,

transformed the political leadership of Damascus, diversifying its power base and altering its political orientation.

The decade from 1914 to 1924 marked a crucial period for Greater Syria and the broader West Asian region. The Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I, leading to the establishment of the modern state of Syria in 1920. However, the new state was deeply rooted in historical legacies, political structures, human geography, community interactions, and class distinctions. Strong historical, cultural, and religious ties made it challenging for Syrians to accept a new ruler and way of life within the truncated geographical area called Syria. Before 1864, Syria had never existed as an independent entity, so France's establishment of Syria as an independent political entity in 1920 was a significant development (Salibi, 1988). Syrians resisted this change, viewing the French as outsiders due to religious differences, leading to suspicion and mistrust. Therefore, the Mandatory period (1920-1946) was a period where all the social, economic and political sectors were overhauled and led to severe resistance from the local people. This cathartic development resulted in having less loyalty and allegiance to their newly created states (Binder, 1966).

Colonial Policies

The division of Syria into four separate independent states (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) in 1920, formalized through the San Remo conference, further exacerbated the situation. The Mandatory period (1920-1946) saw comprehensive changes in social, economic, and political sectors, sparking significant resistance from the local population. This upheaval resulted in reduced loyalty and allegiance to the newly created states. One notable consequence of these changes was the emergence of strong trans-state identities, as people struggled to identify with their new states. When Syria gained independence in 1946, its citizens held a cynical view of their newfound status and longed for reunification with the other entities. This desire for the restoration of historical connections bolstered pan-Arabism and fostered a negative attitude towards independent Syria. Amidst these transformations, during World War I, the British government sought to strengthen its position against Germany by trading Syrian territories to various influential players in the region. This included promises made in the Husayn-McMahon correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the Balfour Declaration.

By the mid-1930s, the concept of secular Arabism, which had its roots in the urban Syrian elite before World War I, gained traction. There was a growing assertion that Arabic-speaking Muslims, Christians, and Jews shared a common Arab identity before their religious affiliations (Pipes, 1983). This led to the development of an exclusive Arab nationalist ideology in the 1930s and 1940s. This ideology advocated the separation of religious order and promoted unity across religious communities, with a focus on reviving Arab identity through language, heritage, and the banner of a single Arab flag. Prominent figures like Sati Al-Husri emphasized the importance of language and history as fundamental factors that distinguish nations and inspire national awareness and unity.

Impact of European Powers and Ottomanism

The grandeur and magnificence of the Ottoman Empire lost its sheen by the middle of the eighteenth century. The growing prominence of the European powers in the region compelled the Ottoman rulers to reform militarily, which in turn, led to reforms in other aspects of the society. The Tanzimat reforms with the announcement of the Hatt-i Humayun in February 1856 resulted in the modernisation of the administrative system and led to the centralisation of the hitherto detached districts and mountain valleys of Syria under the direct rule of the Sultan (Khouri, 1983; Hurewitz, 1969; Lewis, 1961).

Equal Ottoman citizenship, irrespective of their religion, was granted in an attempt to replace the religious ordering of the Syrian society, which was dominated by Sunni Muslims. These modernising reforms benefitted the influential landlords and elite class predominantly settled in Damascus. The urban families that produced the political leadership in Damascus and other towns quickly took advantage of their direct access to the government to further enrich themselves. They began to identify themselves with the ideology of Ottomanism that focussed on centralisation. The notables supported the new reforms implemented from Istanbul knowing that opposing would not lead to rejig in the reform policies but rather hamper their existing position and status. Even the autocracy and caprice of the Sultan could be ignored as long as the new balance of power in Damascus did not threaten this leadership's position. Indeed, the notables accepted the directives coming from the imperial capital and tried their best to align with those of the dominant power group in Istanbul (Hourani, 1991).

The invasion of Syria/Lebanon by Ibrahim Pasha in 1832 and various new administrative reforms that followed, also impacted the society to a large extent. Though much credit is given to Pasha for his modern reforms and ushering in secularism and equality in the society, it was primarily for economic gains that such reforms were implemented. The imposition of new legal, penal, and commercial codes inspired by the French model was a sharp break from the traditional Islamic society, which was based on the legal codes of Sharia. A modernised system of administration and law, new patterns of trade and production, faster means of communication, and the steady expansion of Europe, had a profound effect on all communities and classes in the region, but perhaps most visibly on the upper classes, both Turkish and Arabs (Makdisi, 2000; Ma'oz, 1968).

All these reforms in a socially-conservative Damascus (Ma'oz, 1968) made religious leaders raise their voices against secularisation with the fear that it would lead to the downfall of the Empire and the defeat of Islam in its Arab heartland (Kisirwani, 1980). The other opposition force came from the secular officials who were deprived of their earlier position in the state system. They worked in close connection with other Turkish liberal reformers and aimed to restore the constitution and to further decentralise the powers, and allow more space for freedom of expression (Khouri, 1983). This group gradually grew into a large force, which in 1906 formed a secret society under the name "Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)". By July 1908, the committee could manage to force Sultan 'Abd

ul-Hamid to reinstate the constitution, which he had suspended 30 years earlier (Khoury, 1983).

There was a difference in the interpretation of the ideology of Ottomanism by the CUP and Syrian-Arab notables (Dawn, 1973; Khalidi, 1991, Anderson, 1995). The loss of the European territories during the early twentieth century made the CUP more determined to keep the last remnants of the Turkish and Arab provinces united and more revitalised. This move towards centralisation was taken as Turkification by the Arabic-speaking people, especially in Damascus. The feeling of insecurity and dissent grew because the Committee started imposing the Turkish language in schools and institutions, in the process relegating Arabic to a secondary position (Haddad, 1994). According to Philip S. Khoury, the imposition of the Turkish language in all sectors alienated the Syrian-Arab population. All the court proceedings were conducted in Turkish and even the school children were made to learn the language compulsorily. In government functionaries, all official orders were in Turkish and in some cases, an interpreter became essential (Khoury, 2003). All the more, Syrian-Arab notables were replaced from their important provincial positions by the Committee as the latter saw the Syrian-Arab notables as “unprofessional and untrustworthy” (Khoury, 1987).

The Syrian-Arab notables' understanding of Ottomanism was also in line with the CUP, but the extreme form of centralisation was against the interests of the Arab notables. The Syrian-Arab notables under the Sultan had a fair degree of autonomy to exercise. There existed a mutual patron-client relationship between the Sultan and the provincial notables. Certain opposition from various quarters was present who fell out of favour with the Sultan, but it was not an opposition based on a Syrian-Arab national identity as opposed to Turkish identity (Choueiri, 2000; Dawisha, 2003). The radical impositions of Turkish language and the replacement of Arab notables led to the growing feeling among the intelligentsia that unionist centralisation policies were a front for a 'stepped-up Turkification' in the Empire (Khoury, 1983).

The forces of Ottoman centralisation and 'Turkification' jeopardised the material well-being and careers of a large fraction of the landowning-bureaucratic class in Damascus. Politically-active members of the class whose economic interests may already have been declining or who were dismissed from their offices or who were denied entry into government, despite their proper qualifications, found sufficient reason to seize an emerging idea of Arabism, and fashion it into a political movement of opposition (Khalidi, 1991; Zeine, 1977). These Arabists focused their grievances on both the Young Turks and those members of their class who managed to survive the upheaval with their interests and positions intact and who thus had reason to support the new regime and the new status quo.

The deposition of the Sultan in 1909 alarmed the Syrian-Arab notables, and along with him, the rest of the Syrian advisors and officials were sent off or pensioned. This created discontent, and the secularist CUP was denounced as the usurper of legitimate Muslim rule, and a new ideology was born, namely, Arabism

(Hourani, 1991). It emphasised the need for a larger measure of political and administrative decentralisation in the Arabic-speaking provinces and Rafiq Bey al-Azm and Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar were the most vocal supporters.

To oppose the parliament in Istanbul, many of the Syrian-Arab deputies remained cautious due to fear of repercussions. The few who opposed openly were Damascus deputies like, Shafiq Mu'ayyad al-'Azm, and Rushdi al-Sham'a, who actively attacked the CUP (Kayali, 1995). Their efforts were supported by a religious shaykh from Hama, 'Abd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi, who was elected to the Chamber on the Unionist ticket but soon quarrelled with his sponsor and switched his allegiance to the Damascus parliamentary opposition. By 1912, the Ottoman parliament was composed only of the unionist element leaving little space for the Arab interests.

The platform for fighting shifted from Damascus and Istanbul to Cairo and Paris from where they denounced the Unionists (Kayali, 1995). The formal base for the Syrian-Arab to collectively voice out their common goals was Cairo, and in January 1913, the Ottoman Party of Administrative Decentralisation (Hizb al-lamarkaziyya al-idariyya Wuihmani) was founded (Kayali, 1995, Khalidi, 1984). But it also faced opposition from Syrian notables, particularly in Damascus, who had managed to retain or regain their local power bases by collaborating with the CUP. Encouraged by the CUP to attack the Decentralisation Party, Damascus Unionists like Muhammad Fawzi al-'Azm, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Yusuf, Ahmad al-Sham'a (member of the Municipal Council and father of Rushdi), Sami Mardam-Beg and Nasib al-Hamza accused the Decentralisation Party founders of being political propagandists and agents of European powers (Khoury, 1983).

Their accusations were not without foundation. The historical record indicates that before the First World War, British officials encouraged the idea of Arabism and some loose form of Syrian territorial unity as a potential safety valve to “protect Egypt from Turkish or foreign invasion” (Cited in Khoury, 1981). It also seems that some leaders of the Decentralisation Party were interested in promoting the idea of British tutelage for the Arabs, as opposed to French protection, should the Ottoman Empire be further dismembered (Khalidi, 1980). From the vantage of Damascus politics, however, this condemnation was indicative of the growing power struggle within the local political elite and this conflict was expressed through the ideological terms of pro-Unionist 'Ottomanism' versus anti-Unionist 'Arabism' (Khoury, 1981).

Geopolitics, Rise of Modern Syria and Arab Nationalism

One of the most prominent effect of the dissolution of “Greater Syria” was the generation of a formidable trans-state identities. Identifying with the state was missing and henceforth, when Syria received independence in 1946, it was composed of citizens who had a cynical approach to the newfound status. In fact, the Syrians considered their independence from France in 1946, as the ultimate division of their state and longed for reunification of all the four new entities (Pipes, 1990). This yearning for the restoration of historical connections gave a

new impetus to pan-Arabism and a disdain attitude towards independent Syria (Kessler, 1987).

Amid all these transformations, during the First World War, the British government was trying to strengthen itself in its fight against Germany by trading the Syrian territories to different important players in the region. Through the Husayn-McMahon correspondence in which Britain promised portions of Syria to Sharif al-Husayn, the Ottoman governor of Mecca; under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 it agreed to cede Syria to France; and under the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, it pledged support for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” (Pipes, 1983).

The idea of secular Arabism, which was ingrained by the Ottomanised urban Syrian elites before the First World War, began to grow by the mid-1930s. More assertion was put that Arabic-speaking Muslims, Christians, and Jews were ‘Arabs’ before they were members of their respective religious communities (Pipes, 1983). Along with it, the demand for Arab rights grew louder, which resulted in establishing an exclusive Arab nationalist ideology by the 1930s and 1940s. It emphasised the separation of the religious order and vouched for unity across religious communities and advocated the revival of Arab nationalist identity through reviving the Arab ethos, language and heritage under the banner of one Arab flag. Al-Husri believed that the “nation is a living organism which has developed organically through a common language and history, which—like all living organisms—is determined by subjective impulses” (quoted in Tibi, 1991). He vouched that nationalism is incompatible with the local patriotism when the nation is divided into several independent states, each evoking its patriotisms. Husri believed in the paramountcy of language and history as the exclusively fundamental factors in distinguishing nations from each other and in inspiring the national awareness leading to unity. “The nation is a living being with life and feeling, life through its language and feeling through its history” (Cleveland, 1972).

Different outlook amongst different communities

Albert H. Hourani described the situation of Syrian society during the Ottoman period as follows:

[The Ottoman Empire] “was composed of a large number of groups, local, tribal, linguistic and religious. On the whole, these groups formed closed communities. Each was a ‘world,’ sufficient to its members and exacting their ultimate loyalty. The worlds touched but did not mingle with each other; each looked at the rest with suspicion and even hatred. Almost all were stagnant, unchanging, and limited; but the Sunni world, although torn by every sort of internal dissension, had something universal, self-confidence, and sense of responsibility which the others lacked. They were all marginal, shut out from power and historic decision” (Hourani, 1946).

The governance of the vilayets was highly exclusive, with people largely keeping to their own communities. The concept of a nation-state was unfamiliar, and individuals were more committed to their community, sect, tribe, and religion than

to the broader entity (Hourani, 1991). The traditional structure favoured Sunni dominance with close ties to the Ottoman rulers, resulting in a stark divide between the wealthy and the impoverished. People from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds mostly worked under the authority of their local leaders. Local disputes and mistreatment by these leaders often led to conflicts and uprisings.

The majority of peasants and the working class, mainly consisting of Druze and Alawis, faced similar treatment from France and their local Sunni leaders and overlords. This led to a sort of parallel resistance movement. Within their local communities, there was a clear distinction between urban and rural areas, with numerous revolts and labor strikes taking place. Beinín documents more than 30 Alawis and Druze uprisings, as well as over 12 revolts in the vicinity of Mount Lebanon, bordering northern Syria (Beinín, 2001). These revolts primarily aimed for better wages. As Rabinovich noted, the animosity between the rich and poor was so intense that one could almost describe two separate populations coexisting within the same political framework (Rabinovich, 1972). Sunni and Druze communities even had separate courts to settle disputes. This local conflict landscape changed with the arrival of the French.

French understanding of the conflict

European nations perceived these conflicts and tensions among Arab communities and sects as deeply rooted, inherent, and sectarian, and they exploited the situation to their advantage. Protestant missionaries from Europe explored the region, establishing new channels of cross-cultural communication while still maintaining their fundamental mission work goals (Makdisi, 2008). France viewed the Syrian conflict as sectarian and actively worked to further divide the various communities. The French administration failed to consider the long-standing historical ties and socio-cultural connections that the population shared among them. This short-sightedness prevented them from grasping the sentiments of the people and their collective goals and political aspirations (Buheiry, 1984). Additionally, they differentiated between communities, regarding minority Christians as more socially and culturally advanced and attempting to instil in them the notion of being different from the Muslim majority (Makdisi, 2008).

Consequently, the distinct characteristics of various communities became more pronounced due to the divisive policies of colonial powers. This fostered political and sectarian awareness among the people, particularly in regions like the Druze and Alawis, who began to seek autonomy. The granting of autonomous status in 1922 to the Druze and Alawis in the Jabal al-Druze and Latakia regions, respectively, bolstered their influence. The suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire lost its significance, and each sect started seeking power and influence by aligning with external forces. The policies pursued by imperial powers focused on grouping and overseeing supposedly homogeneous ethnic and religious groups (Rabinovich, 1979). Consequently, when Syria gained independence in 1946, the West had already sown seeds of discontent and mistrust among the diverse communities, leading Kienle to observe that the Arab world consisted of “territorial states” rather than “nation-states”

(Kienle, 1990).

Despite the call for Arab Nationalism, the lingering influence of Western powers continued to impact the newly independent Syrian state. The division of Alawite and Druze communities into separate autonomous entities during the French Mandate fostered a distinct political consciousness among them, setting them apart from the Sunni majority. This prompted them to pursue separatist agendas fueled by loyalty to their sects and regions. Furthermore, competing ideologies among various political parties added to the complexity. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), established in 1932 under Antun Sa'adah's leadership, championed the concept of a "Greater Syria" that transcended religious and ethnic boundaries to form an idealized pan-Syrian nation. This ideology clashed with the pan-Arabism advocated by the Ba'ath Party and the Communist Party. While the SSNP initially garnered significant support among the youth, its popularity waned after the political execution of Sa'adah. The involvement of regional leaders like King Farouk (Egypt), Riad al-Solh (Lebanon), and Husni al-Zaim (Syria) in Sa'adah's execution in July 1949 further complicated the understanding of each leader's vision of 'Greater Syria.' Each leader, guided by their own ideological interpretation of belonging, sought to capture the hearts and minds of the youth, ultimately leading to the triumph of the Ba'ath Party.

The prolonged support extended by the French to Maronite Christians, coupled with the deliberate instilling of separatist ideas, solidified the emergence of ultra-nationalist parties in Lebanon. This is evident in the rise of the Kataeb party in Lebanon, which championed Lebanese nationalism in opposition to Greater Syrian Nationalism. The SSNP rejected the idea of a Lebanese state on a geographical basis, considering it a fictitious entity lacking historical and social foundations (as cited in Pipes, 1988). Despite early flirtations with Arab Nationalism and the Ba'ath party, the SSNP ultimately turned against these movements, leading to the arrest and execution of its leader, Antun Sa'ada, on charges of treason and causing dissension in July 1949 (Behsara, 2010). Although there was a resurgence of pan-Syrianism, it is important to note that this did not imply the emergence of a completely distinct Syrian identity separate from Arabism. As Raymond Hinnebusch suggests, Syrian identity continued to be Arab in essence, and the regime's legitimacy rested on representing Arab cause (Hinnebusch, 2008).

It is crucial to recognize that the call for Arab nationalism was not uniform. Two distinct groups existed: urban notables and the lower classes, including minority groups. Urban notables sought to end French control to gain full autonomy, while the lower classes and minority groups sought freedom from both the French and their local overlords (Kramer, 1993). Given that the Ottoman Empire was predominantly Sunni, it held significant influence over minority Shia communities. Ottoman and Syrian elites exerted their authority, leading to punitive expeditions and the collection of revenue from Alawi and Druze areas (Rabinovich, 1979). This oppression drove many minority groups to seek assistance from the French and British

(Rabinovich, 1979). The European powers exploited this situation, establishing a patron-client relationship.

The idea of Arab unity persisted in the region even after the creation of new independent Arab states following World War II. However, the divisive policies pursued by the French, favoring minorities such as Christians, Druzes, Kurds, Circassians, and Alawites over the Sunni majority, had already sown discord among the various communities (Hinnebusch, 2008). During the mandate period, to counter Sunni Muslim resistance under the banner of Arab nationalism, the French tailored their policies to cater to the needs of minority groups. The French security and intelligence services assigned their most capable officers with linguistic skills and local knowledge to assist in the administration of compact minority areas. In essence, the intelligence wing assumed responsibility for containing Sunni Muslim dominance (Khouri, 1987). Selective recruitment of local forces in the army along religious and ethnic lines was a clear manifestation of their polarizing policy (Hinnebusch, 2008).

The French intelligence service played a pivotal role in suppressing Arab nationalist sentiments and sought to win the loyalty of minority groups in Syria. Within French Syria, the intelligence service was more than just a missing dimension of French authority; it formed a network with local police officers to police and monitor tribal activities, asserting its supremacy. The high commission's administration became highly politicized, and with the assistance of the French intelligence wing's liaison with tribal minorities, division was sown among the diverse communities (Thomas, 2002). These polarization techniques created an atmosphere of suspicion, where the actions and gestures of one group were perceived as threats by their neighbours. The pursuit of political power became increasingly linked to ethnicity, religion, and locality (Peretz, 1993). Thus, for much of the Mandate Period, the French administration deliberately worked to drive a wedge among the diverse communities through their inter-sectarian policies, rather than governing the entire Arab self-government as a unified entity. On the other hand, Britain falsely claimed to support Arab nationalism and aligned with Arab groups, particularly the Druze, in an attempt to gain influence in the region (Thomas, 2002).

Druze and Kurds Alienation

These divisive policies by the colonial powers resulted in fragmentation among the people, leading to distinct partisan movements and struggles for independence. Druze separatism is one such example (Aboultaif, 2018). The resistance to Syrian national integration encountered one of its most formidable challenges from the Druze community. On the commemoration of Evacuation Day on April 17, 1946, Druze leader Sultan Pasha al-Atrash chose to boycott the event. Having previously rebelled against the French in 1925 and tasted political power as the president of Syria's short-lived provisional government in the Jabal Druze region, the Druze claimed to be the forefront of the Great Syrian Revolt and demanded special autonomy. Their vision of Arab nationalism diverged significantly from that of Damascene nationalists who aimed to construct a Syrian state

by dismantling the Druze social structure and administrative autonomy in Jabal Druze (Aboultaif, 2018).

In the early years of independence, most political organizations were rooted in regional affiliations, driven by local dynamics such as sectarian, tribal, and familial politics. The Salkhad revolt of 1946, an intra-Druze conflict, and the subsequent reconciliation between the People's Party and the Artashes in December 1948 underscored President Quwwatli and his allies' determination to undermine Druze autonomy in Syria. This revolt only subsided when King Abdullah of Jordan declined to annex Jabal Druze in the summer of 1947, a decision influenced by concerns about potential inter-Arab conflicts related to the Palestine issue (Balanche, 2018). President Quwwatli's stance during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the subsequent erosion of his reputation following the Arab states' defeat led to a softer approach toward the Druze (Balanche, 2018).

Following Syria's independence, a series of Sunni-dominated governments made concerted efforts to erode Jabal Druze's autonomy. The Syrian leadership's hostility toward the Druze community was evident, and the Druze's resistance remained steadfast. From Quwwatli's presidency (1946-1949) to Abid ash-Shisakali's rule (December 1949-1954), there was persistent pressure to integrate Jabal Druze into the Syrian administrative framework and eliminate its autonomy. Philip S. Khoury, Pothart, and Itamar Rabinovich emphasized that this process was far from smooth (Khoury, 1988). Quwwatli's confrontation with the Druze highlights the challenges Syrians faced in centralizing state power and forging a unified national identity. Subnational loyalties did not wane after independence; instead, they continued to play a significant role in shaping national politics (Khoury, 1988).

It's worth noting that President Quwwatli instigated intra-Druze conflicts, deliberated with King Abdullah of Jordan and the Druze on the matter of Jabal Druze's authority, and authorized the indiscriminate bombing of Druze towns by President Shishakli of Syria. These actions underscore that Jabal Druze's integration into the Syrian state was far from a smooth process, as modern secular nationalism was unable to dissolve primordial identities and loyalties to family, tribe, ethnicity, and confessional group (Khoury, 1988). Even after independence, a sense of political community was lacking, undermining national unity. The Druze and Alawite communities were reluctant to embrace Sunni Arabism, as many Syrians remained loyal to their local chiefs rather than the state (Landis, 2001).

The Kurdish factor should not be overlooked. State-society cohesion was absent, and Kurds in Syria were marginalized, unrepresented, and dismissed. The arrival of the Ba'ath Party in 1963 led to the renaming of the state from the Syrian Republic to the Syrian Arab Republic, explicitly defining the state and its people as Arab, with the Ba'ath Party as Syria's ruling party, and the revolution's goal being Arab unity.

This exclusivity did not leave room for other ethnic groups. The Syrian government continues to deny the indigenous status of Kurds in Syrian territory (Tejel 2009). Since the French

Mandate, no census in Syria acknowledged ethnic identities. Interestingly, both President Husni Za'im (1949) and Adib al-Shishakli, who ruled Syria between 1949 and 1954, had Kurdish ancestry. Nonetheless, President Adib al-Shishakli, in particular, pursued a homogenous Arab Muslim state by issuing decrees restricting the use of the Kurdish language, banning Kurdish music and expressions of Kurdish identity (Allsopp, 2015).

The radicalization of Arab politics in the 1950s, marked by the Baghdad Pact, triggered intense confrontations between radical Arabist states and conservative monarchies. With the rise of popular Arab nationalism, Kurds also became targets of racist assaults, both by the regime and the Arab public (Allsopp, 2015). Kurdish officers were purged from the military, and members of Kurdish political organizations faced arrests and trials. Kurdish nationalism was unjustly linked to Zionism and Western imperialism, leading to Kurds being labeled as traitors and separatists (Tejel, 2009). Yet, the fear of separatism cannot be ignored, given that the Kurdish areas of Syria are situated along the northern border with Turkey and Iraq. Historically, Jazira, which now forms part of Hasaka Province in north-eastern Syria, was part of Mesopotamia rather than Greater Syria (Cheriff, 1992). Consequently, Kurdish areas in Jazira were subjected to oppressive policies, with Syrians perceiving Kurds as potential "occupiers" akin to Israel (Tejel, 2009).

The dissolution of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1961 and the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 fueled widespread acceptance of Arab nationalism. This shift directly affected the Kurds in Syria. The secessionist coup of 1961 sealed their fate, and since then, the Kurds have been viewed as a threat to the state's territorial integrity and security (Tejel, 2009). The Hasaka census of 1962, conducted in a single day, aimed to Arabize the region, exert control over its population, and initiate a process of artificial demographic change in favor of Arabs (Allsopp, 2015). This census stripped between 120,000 and 150,000 Kurds of citizenship, and made them stateless. The stateless Kurds are deprived of all rights associated with citizenship. They cannot own or even rent property; cannot hold a passport or Syrian identity document; and are disenfranchised and cannot be employed in the public sphere (Tejel, 2009).

One of the most striking policy of Arabisation was implemented in 1965 in which a cordon sanitaire, between 10 and 15 kilometres deep and running 275 kilometres along the Syrian-Turkish border, was planned (Tejel, 2009). Known as the Arab belt, or al-Hizam al-'Arabi, implementation of the plan began during President Hafiz Assad when the state started to move Arabs into the region from the Euphrates River basin. To accommodate these Arabs and reduce the Kurdish population in the region, the state attempted to remove the inhabitants of more than 450 Kurdish villages along the border with Turkey and Iraq (Tejel, 2009). The government provided housing in 34 specially constructed villages and gave them arms. These policies and projects aided forced assimilation of the Kurds to the Arab identity of the state and removed them from their land. Arabisation changed the demography of the area in favour of the Arabs. Statements differ about the Kurdish identity.

Some state officials claim that they are illegal migrants from Turkey, while other state officials describe the Kurds as Arabs of Kurdish origin, or Arab Kurds (Allsopp, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The geostrategic location of Syria made the Western powers seek supremacy and control in the region. The ever-shifting borders during the Mandate period played a crucial role in reinforcing a 'local' understanding of one's community. The establishment of an independent Syrian state did not mark the birth of a nation. In 1946, the Syrian political landscape remained characterized by a complex web of traditional loyalties. Although various communities could unite to resist foreign occupation, they struggled to forge a new collective identity for Syria. Patronage networks and loyalty to local Za'ims (tribal chieftains) persisted, impeding the process of national integration, as individuals continued to look to their local and sectarian leaders to advance their material and ideological interests within the realm of national politics. The 'imported' Syrian state became more intolerant and autocratic resulting in subjugation of the citizens in Syria and side-lining and alienating the ethnic groups especially the Kurds and Druze. The swift toppling of the Assad regime on December 7, 2024 by the rebels was a result of his family's autocratic rule for more than 50 years.

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